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Spring 2015

# Freshman 15: How The University of Akron is affected per residence hall

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FRESHMAN 15: HOW THE UNIVERSITY OF AKRON IS AFFECTED PER RESIDENCE  
HALL

Daniel McQuillen

School of Sport Science and Wellness

**Honors Research Project**

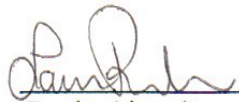
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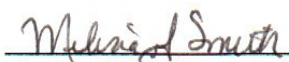
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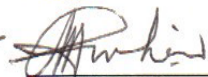
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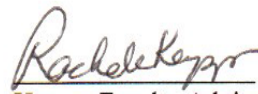
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## ABSTRACT

Students entering their freshmen year of college face a variety of lifestyle changes. These changes often include increased caloric consumption, increased levels of stress, decreased physical activity, and increased alcohol consumption. Because of these lifestyle changes, it is commonly asserted that freshman gain weight throughout their first year in college. A common expression used to describe this weight gain is the “Freshman 15,” which asserts that the average student gains 15 pounds during their freshman year. **PURPOSE:** The purpose of this study was to gather data regarding the on-campus freshmen’s diet and exercise habits. The data gathered was used to analyze whether a student’s location on-campus at The University of Akron correlates with their diet and exercise habits and weight gain during freshman year. **METHODS:** A survey was provided via email to freshman students who are currently living on campus. **RESULTS:** Average weight change was 5.13 pounds, including freshman who did not gain weight or who lost weight. Amongst freshman who gained weight, average weight gain was 9.39 pounds. Residence hall location did not significantly affect weight gain ( $p = 0.056$ ). Residence hall location significantly affects the most often frequented dining location ( $p = 0.001$ ). **CONCLUSION:** Residence hall location appears to affect freshman diet habits, but there is not strong enough evidence to show that it influences weight gain.

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

The obesity epidemic is a prevalent problem in the United States, where today, two out of every three American adults are either overweight or obese (National Institutes of Health, 2012). This is a major health risk, as obesity predisposes for a variety of other conditions including: cardiovascular issues, coronary heart disease, heart attack, stroke, hypertension, diabetes, cancer, and metabolic syndrome (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2011). Not only does obesity threaten the health of the individual, but the current obesity epidemic also affects society in other ways. The society in the United States has become characterized by physical inactivity and unhealthy diet patterns, which has helped cause the rise in overweight and obese adults. Obesity can have a very costly economic impact. In 2008, the estimated cost of medical care related to obesity was \$147 billion. Additionally, obesity is linked to lower worker productivity and more absences from work. These factors show the impact of obesity on society.

One of the most susceptible populations to gaining weight is college students. The “Freshman 15” is a common phrase used to describe the weight gained during the average student’s first year of college. It asserts that the average student gains 15 pounds during their freshman year. This weight gain can be due to a variety of lifestyle changes that students face in the transition from high school to college (Hoffman, Policastro, Quick, & Soo-Kyung, 2006). As students move out of their parent’s homes and transition into independently living they are faced with these lifestyle changes. Many of these lifestyle changes can be unhealthy behaviors that can contribute to the amount of weight gained. Because of this transition, college students are a very

susceptible population to gaining weight. College students gain weight at a much faster rate than the general population (Mihalopoulos, Auinger, & Klein, 2008). If these young adults are already very susceptible to weight gain, it does not bode well for a society that already struggles with and overweight and obese adult population.

Currently at The University of Akron, the meal plans provided by Dining Services to on-campus students limit freshman to campus dining locations. Freshmen are only allowed to have the traditional meal plans, which give students a specific number of “swipes” per week that they can spend at on-campus dining locations. Freshman are not allowed to have the flex meal plans, which give students “dining dollars” where they can spend money provided by their meal plan at off-campus locations that accept zipcard. The flex meal plans are limited to sophomores and upper-classmen.

Residence halls on campus vary drastically as far as the quality and quantity of nearby campus food locations. Some residence halls have multiple food options nearby, while others are very limited. Additionally, some residence halls are located in close proximity to the Student Recreation and Wellness Center, and some are not. Spicer Residence Hall is located adjacent to the Student Recreation and Wellness Center, while Quaker Square Residence Hall is located on the complete opposite corner of campus from the Student Recreation and Wellness Center. Because of these differences, a freshman at The University of Akron can have a very different experience based on which residence hall in which he or she resides.



The purpose of this study was to determine how The University of Akron is affected by the “Freshman 15,” and to see what factors may be influential to weight gain and behavior change in Akron freshmen.

## CHAPTER II

### REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Background studies of the freshman 15 show that the weight gain during freshman year can be attributed to a variety of things. Many students exhibit several lifestyle changes while transitioning to college from high school. Some of the most common lifestyle changes that factor into freshman weight gain include increased caloric consumption, increased levels of stress, decreased levels of physical activity, and increased alcohol consumption (Hoffman et al., 2006). They are also susceptible to changes in sleep pattern (Fedewa, Das, Evans, Dishman, 2014). The biggest indicator of weight gain is decreased physical activity. Transitioning from high school to college, students generally become much less physically active. Decreased physical activity is a much stronger indicator of freshman weight gain than increased caloric consumption (Jung, Bray, & Ginis, 2008).

Previous studies have also shown that the average weight change amongst college freshman is approximately three pounds. This is based on three separate studies, where the average weight change of each study hovered around three pounds. In a study of 217 first-year college students, the mean weight change was 2.86 pounds (Hoffman et al., 2006). In another study of 101 first-year University women who resided on-campus, mean weight change was 3.08 pounds (Jung et al., 2008). A third study, which was a survey study of freshman living on-campus, where 131 responses were received from 582 freshman, determined the average weight change to be 2.7 pounds (Mihalopoulos et al., 2008). However, these numbers reflect the average weight change, not the average weight gain. Approximately half of college freshman

gain weight, whereas some freshmen do not gain weight, and approximately 15% of college freshmen lose weight (Mihalopoulos et al., 2008). Because of this, the average weight change can be skewed. Amongst those college freshmen who do gain weight, the average weight gain is closer to seven pounds. The average weight gain in those same three studies was 6.82 pounds (Hoffman et al., 2006), 7.54 pounds (Jung et al., 2008), and 7.4 pounds (Mihalopoulos et al., 2008), respectively. Since the average weight gain is only approximately seven pounds, the fifteen pounds claimed by the “Freshman 15” may be slightly exaggerated. However, it is still clear that a large number of college freshmen do gain weight. Weight gain amongst college freshmen is 5.5 times faster than the weight gain experienced by the general public (Mihalopoulos et al., 2008). Most college students are also not meeting their dietary and physical activity guidelines (Huang, Harris, Lee, Nazir, Born, & Kaur, 2003). Additionally, men may be more susceptible to the “freshman 15,” as they gain more weight than women (Mihalopoulos et al., 2008).

However, gaining weight is not always necessarily a negative thing. There are also healthy ways to gain weight. Many college students may have gains in lean body mass, and these gains could be due to proper exercise and nutrition. Because of this, weight gain alone is not always the best indicator of unhealthy behaviors. Changes in an individual’s adiposity can be a better indicator. However, it is also clear that college students face changes in adiposity in addition to weight gain. Based on the results from 19 different studies, it was determined that freshmen gain an average of about 1.2% body fat (Fedewa et al., 2014). As far as body mass index, students entering college have an overweight or obesity rate of 25.6%, but amongst seniors leaving college, the rate has risen to 32.0% (Nicoteri & Miskovsky 2014). It is clear that

body weight, BMI, and percent body fat all increase during the freshman academic year. Freshman weight gain is significantly associated with increased body fat and waist circumference, both of which are indicators of obesity related health risks (Gropper, et al., 2009).

The purpose of this study was to provide a survey to freshman students who are currently living on campus in order to gather data regarding the students' location on campus, as well as their diet and exercise habits and weight gain. The hypothesis was that a University of Akron freshman's location on campus influences their diet and exercise habits and contributes to the amount of weight gained throughout their freshman year.

## CHAPTER III

### METHODS

Before any data was collected, the research project was approved by The University of Akron's Institutional Review Board. The survey used for this research was created using the Qualtrics software. The survey asked participants to identify their sex and residence hall, and then asked a variety of questions regarding the students' diet and exercise habits. The full copy of the survey including the questions and possible responses for each question are included in Appendix A. Participation in the survey was completely voluntary and responses were anonymous. The participants were freshman at The University of Akron who reside in a residence hall on-campus. Independent of any other factors, all freshmen who lived on-campus were provided the survey.

The emails of all on-campus students were provided to The University of Akron Honors College by the Department of Residence Life and Housing. In March, an email containing a link to the survey was then sent out to all students residing on-campus. Since the goal of this project was to research about the freshman 15, only freshman data was to be included. To isolate the freshman data from the survey, an additional question was added to the survey asking participants to indicate their class rank. The sample size used in the data depended on the response rate of the survey. In total, 178 freshman responded to the survey. However, some residence halls have a much greater population than others. Because of this not every building had the same number of responses. For example, Bulger Residence Hall had the lowest number of responses, receiving only three freshman responses, while the Honors Complex received 58

freshman responses. The sample size for each residence hall varied. To combat the low sample size for some buildings, the residence halls were combined into four different categories based on their location. The residence halls were combined with adjacent buildings. Bulger Residence Hall, the Honors Complex, Orr Residence Hall, Ritchie Residence Hall, Sisler-McFawn Residence Hall, and Spanton Residence Hall are collectively known as the North Quad, as they are all adjacently located on the Northern side of campus. These buildings were combined into one category. South Residence Hall and Exchange Street Residence Hall are located adjacently on the South side of campus, and these two buildings were also combined. Spicer Residence Hall and Quaker Square Residence Hall each stand alone and were not combined with any other buildings.

### Statistical Design

SPSS was used to analyze the following variables: residence hall location, most often visited campus food location, number of exercise sessions per week, duration of each session, type of exercise, location of exercise, and weight change. A bivariate analysis was performed to examine the correlation between the variables in the survey. Significance was set at  $p < 0.05$ .

## CHAPTER IV

### RESULTS

It was hypothesized that location on campus influences students' diet and exercise habits and contributes to the amount of weight gained throughout the freshman year. During the time that the survey was open, 178 total responses were received, 79 of which were from males and 99 were from females. The average weight change of the survey respondents was 5.13 pounds. This was higher than the three pounds stated by previous studies. However, this weight change also accounts for students that remained the same weight or lost weight. Amongst only the freshman who gained weight throughout the year, the average weight gain was 9.39 pounds. This was also slightly higher than the seven pounds that was stated by previous studies. Based on the results, a breakdown in the weight change amongst each sex can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1

*Mean weight change of survey respondents*

	<i>N</i>	Mean Weight Change (pounds)
Male	79	4.92
Female	99	5.30
Total	178	5.13

Females, on average, had greater weight gains than males. However, an independent sample *t*-test revealed no significant differences in weight gain between males and females ( $p = 0.38$ ).

The results of the bivariate analysis can be seen in the following tables. The main focus of this study was the relationship between residence hall location and weight change as well as residence hall location and the dining location most commonly visited. The relationship between residence hall location and these two variables is displayed below in Table 2. Bivariate analysis revealed that there was no significant correlation between residence hall location and freshman weight gain ( $p = 0.06$ ). There was a significant correlation between residence hall and most common dining location ( $p = 0.001$ ). Additionally, no significant correlation between residence hall location and exercise location was observed ( $p = 0.42$ ).



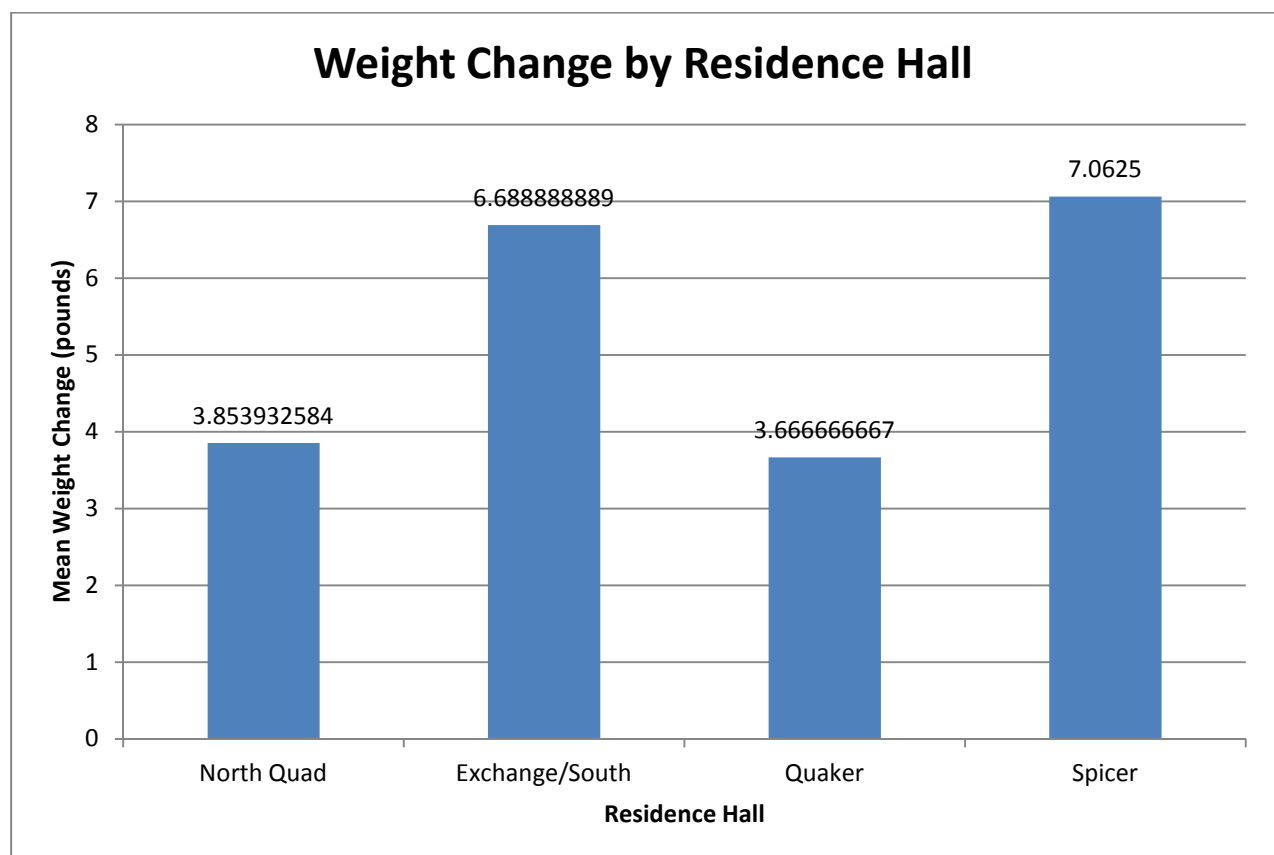
Table 2 *Correlation between residence hall and weight change and dining location*

		Residence Hall	Weight Change	Dining Location	Exercise Location
Pearson Correlation <i>N</i> = 178	Residence Hall	1.00	.144	.256	.060
	Weight Change	.144	1.00	.007	-.055
	Dining Location	.256	.007	1.00	.135
	Exercise Location	.060	-.055	.135	1.00
Sig (2-tailed)	Residence Hall	--	0.056	0.001*	0.424
	Weight Change	0.056	--	0.93	0.463
	Dining Location	0.001*	0.93	--	0.072
	Exercise Location	0.424	0.463	0.072	--

Table 3 depicts the relationship between sex and dining hall location. Bivariate analysis revealed a significant correlation between sex and dining location, ( $p = 0.004$ ).

Table 3 *Correlation between sex and dining location*

		Dining Location
Sex	Pearson Correlation	0.217
	Significance (2-tailed)	0.004*
	N	178



*Figure 1: Mean weight change in pounds for each residence hall location on campus*

Independent sample *t*-tests revealed no significant differences in weight gain between residence hall locations, ( $p > 0.05$ ).

Additional survey questions were included to examine factors that may influence freshman diet and exercise habits. The results of the survey questions “Would you exercise more often at the Student Recreation and Wellness Center if your residence hall was at a more convenient location?” and “Would you eat healthier if there were more options available?” are displayed in Table 4 and Table 5. Fifty-three percent of respondents indicated that they would exercise more often at the Student Recreation and Wellness Center (SRWC) if their residence hall was located closer to the SRWC. Almost eighty-five percent of respondents indicated that if healthier food options were available they would eat healthier.

Table 4 *Would you exercise more often at the Student Recreation and Wellness Center if your residence hall was at a more convenient location?*

	Frequency	Percent
Strongly Agree	41	23.00%
Agree	54	30.30%
Neither Agree nor Disagree	66	37.10%
Disagree	14	7.90%
Strongly Disagree	3	1.70%

Table 5 *Would you eat healthier if there were more options available?*

	Frequency	Percent
Strongly Agree	104	58.40%
Agree	49	27.50%
Neither Agree nor Disagree	22	12.40%
Disagree	2	1.10%
Strongly Disagree	1	0.60%

## CHAPTER V

### DISCUSSION

With the obesity epidemic affecting the United States, the freshman 15 is a common issue faced by college campuses. Although previous research on the freshman 15 has shown that the freshman 15 might be exaggerated, and the average weight gain is not quite 15 pounds, it is still clear that a large number of freshmen on college campuses do gain weight (Mihalopoulos et al., 2008).

Some of my personal background includes three years of employment with The University of Akron's Department of Residence Life and Housing as a Resident Assistant. Therefore, I have had a very unique experience of living in four different residence halls during my four years at The University of Akron. During that time, I believe that I have noticed very different lifestyle behaviors regarding freshman diet and exercise habits based on which residence hall they reside in. Because of that, I wanted to explore the relationship between residence hall location and weight gain, which led to this project.

The survey in this study was administered to investigate how The University of Akron is specifically affected by the freshman 15. It was hypothesized that location on campus influences students' diet and exercise habits and contributes to the amount of weight gained throughout the freshman year.

Based on the results of the current study, it appears that location on campus may influence students' diet habits. Generally, it appears that freshmen prefer to eat at dining locations that are closer to their residence hall. However, there is not strong enough evidence to

show that residence hall location influences weight gained during freshman year. Additionally, it does not appear that there is a correlation between exercise location and changes in weight in the freshman included in the current study. The participants in the current study had an average weight change of 5.13 pounds, which was higher than the three pounds stated by previous studies (Hoffman et al., 2006), (Jung et al., 2008), (Mihalopoulos et al., 2008). Additionally, the average weight gain was 9.39 pounds, which was higher than the seven pounds stated by previous studies (Hoffman et al., 2006), (Jung et al., 2008), (Mihalopoulos et al., 2008).

In the current study, female survey respondents had a higher mean weight change than male survey respondents. Previous studies had shown the opposite, that men gained more weight than women (Mihalopoulos et al., 2008). Although the mean weight changes of each sex in the current study were not significantly different, it was still interesting to note that female's mean weight change was higher than male's.

Although it was not hypothesized that sex would influence the dining location students ate at most often, there was a significant relationship between sex and most common dining location. Rob's Café was the most common response for both males and females. However, Rob's dominated the male responses, while females were very much more likely to eat at other campus food sources, mainly the Union Market or Zee's Natural. Rob's Café is an all-you-can-eat style cafeteria. It is located in the center of the North Quad. The Union Market is located in the Student Union, which is near the center of campus. It also sells a variety of cafeteria foods, but it is not an all-you-can-eat location. Students may pay for each item. Zee's Natural is also located in the Student Union, and sells crepes, rice bowls, and smoothies. It also provides many other items in a convenience store setting, many of which are organic foods.

Various factors influence weight gain, weight loss or weight maintenance. Two of these factors include diet and physical activity habits. Slightly over 50% of freshman respondents either agreed or strongly agreed that their residence hall location influences their exercise habits indicating that if they were located closer to the Student Recreation and Wellness Center it might increase their use of the facility. Almost eight-five percent of respondents indicated that if healthier food options were available they would choose them suggesting that students want to eat healthy; they just feel as if these healthy options are not available or they do not have the proper nutritional education to eat healthy on-campus. Additionally, some of the most common responses to question 13 “What would be the most important factor in you choosing healthier options?” were “price,” “availability,” and “location.” Many students would choose healthier food options if there were more options available or at more convenient locations. This further suggests that students want to eat healthier, but their location has an influence on their diet habits.

### Limitations

There were several limitations to this investigation. Not every freshman on campus responded to the survey. The survey received responses from 178 freshmen. However, as stated earlier in the methodology, not all of the residence halls on campus were evenly represented in the survey. The University of Akron’s residence halls vary with the freshman population that they hold and some halls had a much higher representation of survey participants. Most residence halls ended up with a fair sample size of participants, but some were very low. Bulger Residence Hall only received three freshman responses and Ritchie Residence Hall received six, while 58 of the survey’s responses came from residents in the Honors Complex. The sample

sizes were very uneven. This could cause the data to be an inaccurate representation of campus freshmen, which led me to combine the residence halls into the four categories of campus location. Another limitation was that the students were not weighed throughout the year. The results of the survey were self-reported, therefore, it is possible that their responses regarding their weight change could have been inaccurate. Another limitation of the study was that the freshmen only had their weight evaluated. Changes in the body composition were not measured, only changes in weight. Measuring body composition was beyond the scope of this study. It is very possible that some of the students who gained weight throughout their freshman year did not do so because of unhealthy habits. Some weight gains may have been attributed to gains in lean body mass. These could be considered healthy weight gains due to exercise. This could also skew the results of the study.

### Future Directions

The results of this study can be used for further research. Although the survey used in this study addressed multiple factors regarding the students' diet and exercise habits, the main focus of this study was the relationship between weight gain and residence hall location. Future studies could further explore other factors such as the influence that specific campus dining locations have on students' weight gain. According to the results of the survey, the most common places for freshman to dine on campus are Rob's cafeteria and the Union Market. Further research could explore how these specific food sources can attribute to weight gain in students and suggest areas for Dining Services to provide healthier options. In addition, since one of this study's limitations was that the participants did not have their body compositions measured, future research could address changes in body composition throughout the freshman



year, rather than only evaluating the amount of weight gained. Additionally, since the relationship between residence hall location and weight gained during freshman year was approaching significance, future research could further explore this relationship at The University of Akron.

Conducting this research has been a great experience for me, personally. It has helped teach me many lessons that I can use throughout my career. People are very diverse. Everyone has a variety of unique factors that help shape them as a person and influence their behaviors. In my career, I would like to use an individualized approach, and gather as much information about my clients as I can, so that I can be the best health professional that I am capable of and lead them to reaching their goals. I have also learned that most people do truly desire to be healthy, but many just aren't sure if they have the proper tools or education to make these healthy changes in their lives. Because of this, in hindsight, I would have liked to have given more feedback to my survey participants. Since it seemed that many of them desired to be healthier, I would have liked to have been able to provide them with resources or directed them to information that they could use to gain education pertaining to health regarding proper diet and exercise.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, it appears that there is a significant relationship between a freshman's residence hall location and their most often visited campus dining location. Residence hall location has a large impact on where freshmen prefer to eat, as they generally eat at places that are closer in proximity to their residence hall. This suggests that a freshman's location on

campus does have an effect on their diet behaviors. Over 50% of freshman agreed that they would exercise more at the Student Recreation and Wellness Center if their residence hall was at a more convenient location. This may also suggest that a freshman's location on campus can influence their exercise habits. There was not strong enough evidence to signify that residence hall location has an influence on amount of weight gained during freshman year. However, being only an honors research project, this study was limited. The results of this study, however, could open the door for future research. Further studies with a wider scope could further explore the effect that residence hall location has on a freshman's diet and exercise habits, as well as further explore if residence hall location influences the "freshman 15."

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## Appendix A: Survey questions with possible responses

1. Thank you for taking a couple minutes to complete this survey. Your results are beneficial to collecting data to complete this research project.

I understand that by selecting “Yes” that I freely consent to have my data from this survey used in a research project regarding the freshman 15 at The University of Akron.

I understand that I will not be compensated for my participation and that this survey is for academic purposes only. Responses will be confidential and completely anonymous.

- a. Yes
  - b. No
2. Sex
  - a. Male
  - b. Female
3. Please indicate your class rank
  - a. Freshman
  - b. Sophomore
  - c. Junior
  - d. Senior
  - e. Other
4. Which residence hall do you currently reside in?
  - a. Bulger

- b. Exchange
  - c. Honors
  - d. Orr
  - e. Quaker
  - f. Ritchie
  - g. Sisler-McFawn
  - h. South
  - i. Spanton
  - j. Spicer
5. At which campus food location do you eat most often?
- a. Rob's
  - b. Trackside Grille
  - c. The Creamery
  - d. Union Market
  - e. Ohio Burger
  - f. Zee's Natural
  - g. Zee's Quaker
  - h. Other
6. Approximately how many times per week do you exercise?
- a. Never/Rarely
  - b. 1-2
  - c. 2-4
  - d. 4-6

- e. 6+
7. What is the average duration of each exercise session?
- a. 0-15 minutes
  - b. 15-30 minutes
  - c. 30-45 minutes
  - d. 45-60 minutes
  - e. 60-90 minutes
  - f. 90+ minutes
8. What type of exercise do you mainly do?
- a. Cardio
  - b. Weight lifting
  - c. Sports
  - d. Flexibility (Stretching, Yoga, Pilates, etc.)
9. Where do you usually exercise?
- a. Student Recreation and Wellness Center
  - b. Outside
  - c. At home
  - d. Other facility
10. Would you exercise more often at the Student Recreation and Wellness Center if your residence hall was at a more convenient location?
- a. Strongly Agree
  - b. Agree
  - c. Neither Agree nor Disagree

- d. Disagree
- e. Strongly Disagree

11. How much weight have you gained during your freshman year, if any? (Please enter a number in pounds)

- a. For this question, respondents could type in any number

12. Would you eat healthier if there were more options available?

- a. Strongly Agree
- b. Agree
- c. Neither Agree nor Disagree
- d. Disagree
- e. Strongly Disagree

13. What would be the most important factor in you choosing healthier options?

- a. For this question, respondents could type in any response